



# News Release

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## **Rabies: Awareness is the best defense against deadly disease**

*Rabid animals — especially bats — live in Washington, so take precautions*

**OLYMPIA** — The word “rabies” gets people’s attention right away, and with good reason. It’s among the oldest and deadliest infectious diseases on record. It’s preventable, but rabies annually kills 55,000 people around the world, half of them children under age 15.

That’s why the Washington State Department of Health and local health agencies field hundreds of calls each year from residents about potential exposure to rabies.

The viral disease can infect any mammal and exists in Washington, although it’s very rare among people in Washington state. Two cases of human rabies have been identified in the state in the past 20 years.

In Washington, 148 people have received medications to prevent rabies this year. Seventy-four of these cases resulted from encounters with bats. Other people received treatment following bites from dogs, cats, and other animals, including during travel overseas.

In Washington, bats are the most common rabies exposure risk for people. Each year, 5 to 10 percent of bats submitted for testing are found to be rabid. Nine bats have tested positive for rabies so far this year. In 2009, 14 tested positive.

Bats are the primary animal in which rabies is found in the northwest United States. In other parts of the country, raccoons, skunks, and foxes are also known to have rabies. In developing countries worldwide, dogs are the principal animal in which rabies is found.

The disease is transmitted mainly by bite, but exposure may also occur through contamination of broken skin or mucous membranes with saliva or neurological tissue from an infected animal.

People should consult a health care provider if:

- They are bitten by, or have contact with saliva of, a bat or other potentially rabid animal;
- They wake up to find a bat in the sleeping area;
- Or find a bat in a room with a young child, or with any person incapable of accurately describing the situation.

Once disease symptoms develop, rabies is almost always fatal to both animals and people. The good news is that rabies is preventable if medications are given before symptoms develop. However, it's vital to be aware of when the exposure might've taken place and to get proper medical help immediately.

Both the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Alliance for Rabies Control are reinforcing the message that rabies is a preventable disease.

It's a good reminder that preventing rabies starts with you. Protect yourself and your community by keeping pets current on vaccinations, avoiding stray animals and wildlife, and — most importantly in Washington — by not handling bats.

If a bat bites you, wash bite wounds with soap and water, and get medical attention immediately. If a pet is bitten, consult a veterinarian immediately. Prompt and appropriate treatment after being bitten and before symptoms develop can prevent the disease in humans.

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Visit the Washington Department of Health website at <a href="http://www.doh.wa.gov">http://www.doh.wa.gov</a> for <i>a healthy dose of information</i> .
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